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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process of developing the Australian English Language Course (AELC) by the Defence International Training Centre in Australia. The 400-hour, intermediate-level course is an English language teaching course to be used by non-English speaking background (NESB) teachers of English at language centers in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Throughout the Asian region, NESB teachers of English struggle with state-of-the-art communicative materials designed by native speakers for a principally native speaker teacher audience. The materials and methodology of English Language Teaching (ELT) usually overlook the fact that the language proficiency of the teacher using the materials may be less than native-like. English text materials often discuss content that is foreign and not effective for teachers and students. AELC remedied this problem by extensive training and consultation with the teachers who would use the course, thus making it more relevant to Asian educational settings and cultures. The first draft of the new course was tested out in August 1994; revisions were gathered from a post-trial teacher workshop. To develop English-as-a-Foreign-Language texts that are effective and meaningful teaching aids in Asian environments, it is vital that the Anglocentric models be abandoned in favor of the actual context in which the language will be learnt and used. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/NAV)

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Linguistic and Cultural Considerations of Writing ELT Texts for Use in Asia

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Linguistic and cultural considerations of writing ELT texts for use in Asia

Richard Colebrook

Abstract: *Throughout the Asian region, non-English-speaking background (NESB) teachers of English grapple with state-of-the-art communicative materials designed by native speakers for a principally native speaker teacher audience. The materials and methodology of ELT usually overlook the fact that the language proficiency of the teacher using the materials may be less than native-like; and the issue of developing (or adapting) effective ELT materials for use by NESB teachers receives scant attention on teacher-training programs. Should NESB teachers of English be the focus of specially-designed materials, or should they simply be expected to use the standard, commercially-available range of "communicative" materials? How relevant is the content of ELT textbooks to the "needs" of Asian students of English?*

The Defence International Training Centre in Australia has had to confront these issues in embarking upon a project to design a communicative English language course for NESB teachers working in defence force language centres in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. This action research paper describes the process of developing the Australian English Language Course, and discusses some of the methodological and curriculum issues which have had to be addressed in the writing of a course intended for use by NESB teachers throughout the Southeast Asian region.

Language, culture and context

A recent article entitled "The need for a cross-cultural approach to teaching EFL" by Mongi Bahloul (1994), a teacher of English from Tunisia, argues that foreign English language (EL) teachers' insistence on using communicative teaching methods and their inability to accept local classroom practices and learning styles stems from a lack of cross-cultural understanding. Bahloul calls for a cross-cultural approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in which EFL supports, rather than works against, the host country's culture and education system.

The article provoked an acrimonious response from Mary Schieppregell (1994: 4), an American Professor of Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), who rejects outright Bahloul's viewpoint on the grounds that it "confuses cultural understanding and pedagogy and denies the real cross-cultural approach that is an inevitable result of having foreign teachers in language education".

"Asking foreign teachers", she continues, "to adopt methods that they believe to be ineffective, and calling this a cross-cultural approach, makes a mockery of professionalism." The letter concludes prophetically with an unequivocally deterministic prediction about EFL and its place in the world:

> In the end, foreign [EFL] teachers will bring new ways of teaching in to the educational systems of other countries...the presence of foreign teachers can stimulate dialogue among educators about what works well and what can be improved in English teaching, for the benefit of the students.

Schieppregell's claim that Bahloul has confused cultural understanding and pedagogy suggests that "pedagogy" exists in some pure form outside the realm of culture. But she also suggests that, through what she describes as "the real cross-cultural approach that is the inevitable result of having foreign teachers in language education", some form of cultural adjustment will occur "for the benefit of the students". If there is any confusion here, it appears to lie with the professor's understanding of the complex relationship between language, culture and context - a relationship which her discipline has rationalized through its construction of the service it offers, English language training (ELT), as "natural, neutral and beneficial".

The issue of cultural appropriacy of ELT materials and methodology in foreign contexts raises the ethical question of whether native speakers have the right to dictate the terms of how "their" language is taught and, in so doing, to impose their pedagogical values and systems on other cultures. The monopolization of ELT professional practice by native speaker text-writers and teachers has far-reaching implications, not only in terms of how English is taught, but also in terms of the cultural and political values that permeate the content of the so-called "authentic texts" used in EL instruction. However, over and above the *ethical* considerations of whether native speakers have the right to

prescribe content and methodology, is the basic *pedagogical* issue of whether these current universalist approaches of the ELT industry towards language education do what they claim to do - that is, to offer the most effective means for students to learn English *in all situations*. A growing body of research is beginning to challenge the appropriacy of universalist approaches to teaching English in bilingual and non-English-speaking background (NESB) teaching environments (e.g. McGroaty 1992, 1995; Auerbach 1993; Gillespie 1994).

As insights from comparative education (e.g. Biggs 1994) have shown us, normative approaches to pedagogy and evaluative comments about other pedagogies (such as those made by Schieppregell regarding the Tunisian educational system) need to be acknowledged in foreign educational settings as *perceptions* rather than universal truths. It is indeed difficult to detach ourselves from our own biases about how language "should" be taught - to accept the notion that, in education, many roads may lead to Rome...and that those same roads may also lead to a multitude of other destinations.

For example, "rote-learning" is generally eschewed by most contemporary western educators as a low-level, non-interactive cognitive activity, so much so that not only is it proscribed as a legitimate approach to teaching, but it is also used as the basis for a deficit model (Ballard & Clancy 1984). The common preference of Asian students for this mode of learning is ascribed to their coming from "reproductive" intellectual traditions, and being unable to adapt to our enlightened, "extensive" tradition. We have rigidly adhered to such perceptions of Asian learning styles in the face of considerable evidence that students from these educational environments actually achieve higher results than western students both at home and overseas (Sue & Okazaki 1990, cited in Biggs 1994).

This is not to suggest that one approach to learning is better than another, but simply to illustrate that these approaches need to be seen as culture- and context-dependent. The pedagogical context will reflect certain preferred learning styles, which are both conscious and intuitive. Research indicates that students and teachers will choose strategies on the basis of particular affective, cognitive and learning styles (Reid 1987), or as a result of socialization into a particular educational culture (Guild & Garger 1985; Young 1987).

NESB teachers, the EFL publishing industry and CLT

The issue of language, context and culture has received considerable attention from academics (e.g. Widdowson 1991; Kramsch 1994), although this work appears to have had no perceivable effect on the international "one suits all" approach of the EFL textbook publishing industry. Besides failing to address adequately the cultural dimension in language learning, monocultural international EFL textbooks, produced as they are by native speakers of English for a principally native speaker teacher audience, overlook the practical constraints of using these materials in different educational settings. The issue of how to develop (or adapt) ELT materials for use by NESB teachers is a problematic and generally ignored question in materials development - even though the vast majority of learners currently studying English throughout the world are taught by NESB teachers. Unlike the situation that pertains in the teaching of second languages other than English (LOTE) - where practical solutions have been applied to the problem of a lack of native speaker teachers - the "one suits all" materials and methodology of ELT usually overlook the point that the language proficiency of the teacher using the materials may be less than native-like.

Since such is the case, should NESB teachers of English be the focus of specially-designed materials, or should they simply be expected to use the standard, commercially-available range of "communicative" materials? Given that the rich and diverse range of materials produced by the ELT publishing industry caters for the "needs" of just about everyone except the NESB teacher of English, it seems that the second of these alternatives represents the prevalent attitude towards the problem. After all, one of the central precepts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is that it is the *learner* rather than the *teacher* who is at the centre of the learning process; it is therefore reasonable to expect that NESB teachers with good communicative teaching skills and materials should become effective language-learning facilitators - or at least such is the basic tenet of EFL teacher-training in NESB environments...It sounds good in theory, but does it work?

In practice, it seems that many NESB teachers of EFL (including those who have been intensively trained in CLT methodology) shy away from communicative materials in favour of more traditional, structural approaches, which they believe allow them to work within the constraints

of their linguistic proficiency and to perform their role in the classroom more effectively[1]. Is this simply a problem of a "negative attitude" towards the ideals of CLT (a common complaint from teacher-trainers), or does the problem relate to a mismatch between, on the one hand, the demands on the teachers implicit in the materials and, on the other, the teachers' level of EL proficiency (in other words, is it a linguistic problem over and above the effect of different learning style orientations)?

Parameters of EFL text production: political and pedagogical

The ready acceptance by the ELT profession of the status quo of ELT text production, together with an adherence to the practice of monolingual teaching strategies and a dismissal of the educative function of the students' first language (L1) in the classroom, although seemingly normal to most ELT practitioners, represents what Auerbach (1993: 25) describes as "the tip of an ideological iceberg". Following Phillipson's (1992) linguistic imperialism thesis, Auerbach suggests (*ibid.*) that these ingrained professional practices are part of an ideological orientation which

> privileges the interests of dominant groups and reinforces inequalities...This in turn has diverted attention away from the development of local solutions to pedagogical problems and impeded the process of building on local strengths, resulting in the creation of ideological dependence.

The established parameters of mainstream EFL text production are therefore indubitably economic and political.

Putting aside the complex political processes involved in EFL text production as it exists and looking at a pedagogical ideal to escape this impasse, it is clear that two questions need to be addressed with regard to the textual planning of EL instruction in Asian educational settings:

(i) what *should* happen (in a cultural sense, given different cultural contexts); and

(ii) what *can* happen (in a pedagogical sense, given different pedagogical contexts).

These two questions raise a number of interrelated cultural, linguistic and pedagogical issues, which challenge the assumption that a universal approach is always appropriate to particular educational settings, and form the normative and practical parameters for language textbook design. These issues will be discussed in more detail below, but for the moment they may be summarized as follows:

What should happen?

What educational approach should be used?
What content should be selected?
What models should be used?

What can happen?

Can the text work effectively in the local educational context?
Can the local teachers use the text effectively?
Can the text address students' "needs" in the local context?

Figure 1: Normative and practical parameters for textbook design

Critical studies of the cultural content of EFL texts

Although still far below a level likely to cause concern to either the publishers or the ELT profession, a growing body of research is beginning to analyze critically the cultural assumptions in ELT methodology and materials design.

At a general level, writers such as Candlin (1989) and Kramsch (1994) argue that current approaches to culture and context in EFL materials, as well as assumptions about the connection between language and culture, are seriously inadequate. Candlin (*art.cit.*: 1) argues that:

> the connections between the language of a culture and the culture itself have often been asserted in the pedagogical literature (and especially in the coursebooks of schools) to be simply correlational, indeed frequently reduced to the lexification of curious behaviours, or the

> providing of inventories of appropriate phrases whose reasons for appropriateness, sources and constitutive sociologies have remained quite opaque.

The notion of "authentic texts" (meaning texts generated by native speakers in the target language culture) as a necessary part of the path to communicative competence has recently been directly challenged by several writers (Widdowson 1991; Kramsch 1994; Oda 1995). The authentic text is a central source of material for the modern EFL textbook. However, a number of questions are left begging. What, for instance, determines whether a text is authentic or not? What does the authentic text represent? Is our selection of authentic texts affected by the linguistic and cultural norms that affect our selection of other linguistic models? Kramsch (*op.cit.*: 178) argues that:

> with the increased necessity to develop not only communicative but cultural competence in language teaching, the need has grown to reassess the notion of authentic text and communicative authenticity.

We can no longer assume that the "cultural competence" of native speakers of English in western countries necessarily equates with the cultural competence related to the use of English in "other" contexts around the world - contexts where, as a second language, English has quite different functions from the idealized world of the EFL text.

Specific criticisms of EFL texts have been made from a number of perspectives. Prodromou (1988: 76), for example, notes that:

> globally-designed textbooks have continued to be stubbornly Anglocentric: appealing to a world market as they do, they cannot by definition draw upon local varieties of English.

For Prodromou, the content of the EFL text is "vacuous, empty of life", presenting what amounts to a "cardboard cut-out world". Alptekin (1993) uses a psycholinguistic analysis of target-language culture in EFL materials, arguing that writers' unconscious operation within particular frames of schematic knowledge results in texts which place unnecessary additional cognitive demands on students from language backgrounds based on different schemata. Illustrations in ELT materials pose a similar schematic problem, according to Hewings (1991).

Although some writers have approached the issue from an ethical position (e.g. Brown 1990; Heiman 1994), seeing the EFL text as "imposing western values", most of the problems in the EFL text, such as "stereotyping" (Clarke & Clarke 1990), or "inappropriate content" (Ozog 1989) are identified as isolated, text-related problems rather than part of a systemic discursive practice. In other words, criticism has generally only occurred within the linguistic domain of ELT's professional discourse rather than in terms of the broader implications.

In addressing the essentially political nature of language teaching, Pennycook (1994), however, argues that the problem of the EFL textbook extends beyond the issue of textual inappropriacy to broader political issues (*op.cit.*: 178):

> English language teaching beliefs, practices and materials are never neutral, and indeed represent very particular understandings of language, communication, learning, education and so on. Such understandings, in turn, are also not merely random views but rather are very much part of a broader range of discursive and cultural practices that emanate from the "West". The issue, therefore, is not only one of showing the non-neutrality of such views, but also of showing that language teaching practices are connected in a complex reciprocal relationship to the expansion of English and other forms of culture and knowledge.

According to Pennycook, the real significance of Prodromou's criticism of the "cardboard cut-out world" of the EFL text is not only that the text is trivial (and therefore pedagogically inappropriate for adult learners), but that it presents the complexities of the world within a simplified *western* framework. A similar criticism could be levelled at Alptekin's psycholinguistic analysis in that, by considering the problem from a pedagogical perspective at the level of "text" and reader, the analysis misses the broader discursive framework which generates such schematic frameworks in the text.

The *Australian English Language Course*

The Defence International Training Centre (DITC) in Australia has had to confront these questions in embarking upon a project to design an EL course for NESB teachers of English working in military language centres in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. DITC

was commissioned by the Australian Government to develop the *Australian English Language Course* (*AELC*), an intermediate EL course of 400 hours' duration, as part of efforts to extend Australian defence cooperation throughout the Southeast Asian region. For the *AELC* to gain acceptance, it was important that it could hold its own against the *American Language Course* (*ALC*), which has become well-established in language centres throughout the region. The initial approach taken by the course writers was to make the course as "communicative" as possible, but they had to consider that the *ALC*, a more traditional, structure-based course, was a familiar and well-liked text in these educational settings. (Structural approaches to language instruction are more compatible with the military training mode of instruction, although defence force language centres have, in recent years, shown interest in integrating communicative methodology into their language training programs.) The general level of EL proficiency of the teachers who will use the *AELC* ranges from lower- to upper-intermediate. Although a few hold tertiary teaching qualifications, most have been trained as language instructors within military instructor training programs.

The remaining pages of this paper describe the process of developing the *AELC* to its current point of completion[2], and discuss some of the methodological and curriculum issues that have had to be addressed in the writing of a task-based EL course intended for use by NESB teachers throughout the Southeast Asian region.

As the primary aim of the *AELC* is to prepare learners for study in Australia, some of the content is quite specific to the Australian variety of English, addressing issues such as Australian slang, dialectal variations and cultural conventions. However, although the course *is* distinctly Australian, the *AELC* writers were mindful of the fact that mainstream EFL texts fall seriously short in terms of taking into consideration the actual context in which instruction occurs. To develop a course that challenged the ethnocentrism so apparent in mainstream EFL texts and that was as relevant as possible to Asian educational settings became a major priority in designing the text. Extensive trialling and consultation with the teachers who would use the course became an integral part of the writing process. Thus, although the text has a specific institutional function (working within the paradigm of defence cooperation), the project does raise important linguistic and cultural issues which need to considered in the design of ELT materials for other local settings in the Asian region.

The approach taken by the *AELC* writing team was to develop a task-based syllabus, based on authentic texts from various Australian and Asian sources. The spoken texts were to be unscripted and as "authentic" as possible, using a variety of Australian English speakers and speakers of English from Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. This seemed appropriate, not only as the text was to be used in the Asian region, but also because an "Australian English" course should reflect the linguistic diversity of Australia as a multicultural society - a society which, in political rhetoric at least, is beginning to accept itself as part of the Asian region. It also seemed to us that traditional linguistic descriptions of Australian English (such as the "broad - cultivated" classification) were inadequate representations of the variety of language use in Australia, and it was therefore decided that the text should resist the normative approach of other ELT texts in presenting standardized (Anglo-Saxon) dialect models.

Do NESB teachers really need what they say they need?

The first draft of Book 1 of the course was trialled in August 1994 by teachers from the client countries. This was followed by a one-month workshop in which a smaller group reviewed and made recommendations about the structure and format of the *Teachers' Notes*.

Much was learnt by observing the *AELC* materials being trialled. For example, where the ubiquitous direction to "discuss" appears in EFL textbooks, native speaker text-writers may easily overlook how much teacher input is required to initiate and direct an apparently straightforward linguistic exchange. In the text trials, it became apparent that many of the open-ended discussion activities we had designed simply did not work - and the teachers felt uncomfortable using them. The writers realized that discussions do not simply "happen" and, without a proficient conversation facilitator, additional support may be needed from the text. Similarly, when we noticed teachers beginning questions in a pre-reading task with the words: "What means...?", something which would normally be perceived by a teacher-trainer as an error on the part of the teacher, it was regarded in this case as a problem not with the teacher, but with the text - an exercise which had to be re-designed to make it more "user-friendly" to the NESB teacher.

Having reviewed the clients' recommendations regarding the first draft, and having arrived at the point where a final text format had to be decided upon, the question arose as to what extent those recommendations should be followed. The needs data gathered in the workshop was most useful in reformulating our ideas about the practical parameters of what would work, and assisted in the development of better *Teachers' Notes*, preparatory tasks and support materials; however, the procedure of needs analysis could not provide a complete picture of how to go about developing an EFL text that would be most appropriate to the target teaching environments.

We needed to examine not only our own subjectivity, but also the subjectivity of the clients within the broader discursive frameworks involved. In particular, we needed to question *why* they seemed so ready to embrace linguistic norms and teaching practices which placed them at a disadvantage - such as their declared preference for "English-only" classrooms, native over "non-native" models, and linguistic "correctness" in the form of non-variable centralized norms. Many EFL practitioners might no doubt take the attitude: "Well - if that's what they want, why not give it to them?" As has already been made clear, we acknowledge the importance of respecting different pedagogical preferences; but, in providing the clients with *what they believe to be correct* about the English language, would we merely be serving the process of cultural reproduction?

Herein lies one of the central epistemological impasses in our profession. We might ask our students "what they need", but in practice such needs analysis tends to occur only within the linguistic paradigm: "What parts of *my* language do you think you need?", rather than a critical assessment of textbook content and its pedagogical applications in specific settings. Needs analysis, like other positivist approaches in Applied Linguistics, examines observable phenomena with the scientific detachment of a diagnosis, as if the "need" to study English were some fixed transparent property or condition waiting to be discovered. The observable phenomena, the students' immediate linguistic need to gain English for a particular purpose and their expression of *what they say they need*, become the point of analysis - without considering any further the processes which led to that declaration of "need". If we were really concerned about "needs", we would have to look beyond the linguistic domain of content and methodology to the area of "text", in terms of

a critical analysis of the political and cultural effect of the particular texts we intend to use and their related discursive practices in particular settings. Given the potency of British and American cultural hegemony throughout the world today and its obvious connection to the growth of interest in learning English, it is even possible that, if such questions of content were raised in an EFL needs analysis, students would be quite agreeable (and would perhaps even expect) to learn about Queen Elizabeth, Michael Jackson, or the exploits of an international jet-setter.

Examined at a discoursal level, then, it is certainly not surprising that the predominant role of the native speaker and centralized linguistic norms are reflected in the declared preferences of NESB teachers and students of English.

Challenging discursive practices

The need to respect local cultural perspectives and, at the same time, to challenge centralized linguistic controls and discursive formations is a highly complex issue, and one for which there is clearly no single solution. As Pennycook (1994) has noted, the liberation of the "conditions of possibility" of English throughout Asia can only be achieved by considering the cultural politics of the local context as well as the broader global aspects of the English language.

It was only through a critical analysis of the discursive practices surrounding the task of developing the *AELC* that a clearer picture emerged of the real issues we were dealing with - issues of power surrounding the positioning of "self" and an "other" within professional practice and within the EFL text itself: fundamental issues of opposition between native speaker and non-native speaker, L1 as a medium of instruction and "English-only" classrooms, and so on.

It seems that in the LOTE text (in contradistinction to the EFL text), a completely different "self-other" relationship is operating. In LOTE text, the non-native teacher is the subject of a methodology which recognizes that the teacher has limited proficiency in the target language. The professional discourse of LOTE has therefore positioned the concepts of the *native speaker* and *L1 as a medium of instruction* quite differently to ELT. This difference is immediately apparent not only in the structure

of the LOTE text, but also in the professional literature of LOTE (e.g. McKay 1994). The "self-other" relationship in LOTE is also quite different with regard to cultural content, positioning the "foreigner" studying the "foreign language" as the "self", and the target language as the "other" (language).

Discourse itself appears to be the main barrier to developing more effective teaching strategies for NESB teachers of English. Challenging the discursive tenets of the "native speaker" and the "English-only" classroom raises questions about a number of other discursive practices related to this "self-other" discourse - a relationship described by Said (1994), in his analysis of the western novel, as a "structure of attitude and reference". An application of Said's analysis to the EFL text indicates the necessity of developing critical approaches towards EFL text design - approaches that challenge the discursive practices that EFL teachers have come to regard as normal and "commonsense".

For these reasons it was decided to go against the clients' request for standardized models and to include both Asian speakers of English and Asian writers within the text content. As the text had to serve several countries in the region it was not possible, for practical reasons, to include L1 in the text; however, every effort was made in other ways to position the Asian non-native speaker as a subject within the text.

Conclusion

Applied Linguistics acknowledges the urgent need for "real" data, above and beyond its idealized expectations of linguistic models, as a means of testing its theories of how languages are learnt and indicating how these theories might relate to actual teaching practices. Nunan (1987), for example, argues the need for descriptive, classroom-based research to document present realities. As ELT spreads throughout the Asian region, it is vital to gather data not only from the EFL classroom in English-speaking environments (the source of most current data), but also from the EFL classroom where the teacher is a non-native speaker - the place where most language learning occurs and will occur in the future world of "English as an International Language".

Developing different teaching materials for NESB teachers need not mean a "trade-off" in pedagogical ideals since, while it is generally assumed that language is best taught by a native speaker, the non-native teacher may, as Phillipson (1992) and Auerbach (1993) argue, be a more effective facilitator (particularly at lower levels of instruction) than the native speaker, by bringing special cultural and linguistic knowledge and insights to the classroom. Monolingual texts designed by native speakers fail to draw upon this valuable source of input. In order to develop EFL texts which are effective and meaningful teaching aids in Asian environments, it is vital that text-writers abandon Anglocentric models and begin to address the actual context in which the language will be learnt and used.

Notes

1. This assertion is based both on discussions with NESB teachers on teacher development courses at DITC and on data gathered in a questionnaire addressing this issue at the *AELC* Workshop in June 1994, in which client teachers were asked to review the suitability of the *AELC* text and other materials to their teaching environments.

2. The *AELC* comprises three books. At the time of writing (April 1995) Books 1 and 2 were nearing completion. The project is due to be completed by December 1995.

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